

Little tender names

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Little tender names

by [Anuna](#)

Summary

“How was your day?” she asks, and he smiles. Nobody truly cares what his day was like, but rather what he did accomplish.

“Boring and entirely too long,” he says, his usual reservations crumbling quickly under her fingertips. For someone who spent lifetimes pulling up walls between himself and everyone else, he seems to be giving it up without a fight, and he realizes - keeping those walls in place is a fight in itself.

Notes

Its fluff. That's it. That's the whole point of this.

At one point of his life Aleksander has learned how to wake up from a nightmare before it could put its clutches into him. He trained his mind and his body to abandon the suffering in dreams, because his reality has always been harsh enough. If he had to be haunted in his waking hours, by his past and by his enemies, then at least he would secure peaceful sleep for himself, even if it was cut short. And he had enough sleep in his long, lonely years.

He wakes with a start this time, disoriented and uneasy. There's something not quite right, something out of place, a shadow he did not draw, that's clouding his mind. Then he realizes it was a bad dream. Not exactly a nightmare, not even close to those he used to have, but still unpleasant and all too real. And just as he rubs his face with both hands, someone reaches for him.

It's *her* . (He *feels* her before he can see her, lying next to him)

She's here . (She's *still* here. He remembers last night. That was real. And she, right now, is real, and here.)

It's not dawn yet, and there's only a little bit of light in his room, but he can see - Alina, and her dark hair on the ivory clad pillow right next to his, her bare shoulder peeking from under the covers. Her eyes searching his face, and her expression soft and worried.

"Sasha?" she whispers, and it's so quiet, as if she's still trying out that new tender name for him. Nobody has ever called him Sasha, not his mother and not his lovers. Not even Luda. (She had other names for him. *Sasha* , it is just Alina's. It feels like it belongs to her.) It's not something he would allow *now* , to someone else, but Alina is not the kind of person who is going to ask for his agreement. It is not up to him, he realizes, if she decides to pick a tender name for him. It's what she does. "Are you okay?"

He smiles. And it's *so easy* to smile at her. "Just a bad dream," he says. His hand is reaching for her, tucking hair behind her ear - her bun has fallen apart at some point (*naturally* , he thinks, and in his mind he sounds a tad bit too proud even to himself).

"Hmmm," she's still searching his face and drawing closer to him and he is still playing with her hair.

"I'm quite okay," he says. Soothes her. She looks at him for a bit longer and reaches out to touch his lips. He kisses the tips of her fingers. (He marvels at the tenderness of it all.)

"Okay," she says and smiles. "I don't want you to have bad dreams," she says. Something in his chest tugs and twitches. She strokes his beard, seemingly fascinated by it - she *likes* his beard - and when he smiles again (and he didn't smile this much at someone in a long, long time) she smiles too and her fingers caress the tiny lines around his eyes.

"It happens sometimes," he says, shrugs, not because he doesn't want to tell her about it, but because he wants her to be relaxed and carefree.

“Mhmm,” she says and draws closer still, so close that she’s practically pressed against him. He realizes he has spent last month disciplined and focused, indulging in thinking about her so rarely she was here. And she was waiting *for him* .

And that’s something he didn’t have.... in *centuries* . There was just one, only one single person who waited for him like that; and that? That was in another lifetime, another world, and he was someone else. He slept in wooden huts and under open skies, walked through bitter cold and freezing wind - yet his soul wasn’t as dark and harsh as it is now. He looks at Alina and the way her face looks relaxed in her sleep. Her smooth skin and the contrast of her dark hair, soft lips and that small scar on her forehead. At first he wanted Genya to tailor it away, but now all he wants to do is kiss it and hear how she got it.

Focused on her breathing, Aleksander *falls asleep* .

Next time he wakes, it’s slowly, softly, and to the sight of her eyes watching him. She’s playing with his beard (again) and biting her lip at the sight of him opening his eyes - as if she’s *caught* . Which amuses him because.... because, he realizes, she can play with his beard all she wants. And call him Sasha. And walk into his war room and drag him into bed. He’ll let her. And.... he cannot think of something he wouldn’t let her do, right now. Except if it would somehow result in hurting herself.

“Good morning,” she says. When was the last time, when someone wished him good morning like this? When was it that he *cared* ? He knows, of course he knows, but that memory is only going to make him sad. He doesn’t want to pull the shadows over the brightness of this new day, so he leaves the sad memory where it was, in the back of his mind.

“Hello,” he says, his voice deep from sleep. She grins. It’s bright and carefree. She is so young and still unburdened by eternity, and in this moment he is too, even if just for a little while. She pulls herself up, props her head with her palm, her elbow at the soft pillow next to him. Her hair falls *everywhere* , and her cover slips lower, almost low enough to reveal her breasts. He wants to see them in daylight, he wants to see *all* of her. But before he can act on it she’s tugging at his cover, revealing his chest.

And he lets her.

The scars. She’s observing his scars. Last night was too dark to truly see them, but in the daylight they’re clearly visible. Cuts, stabs, arrows, bullets. He’s been hit with everything that exists. And he is still here, a stubborn testament of his own survival.

“Aleksander,” it’s not just his full name, but *how* she says it, the compassion and care and pain, that makes him move and cup her face in his palm. “There are so many.”

“They don’t hurt. Not anymore,” he pulls her closer and rises enough to kiss her forehead. “It’s... the past. Don’t worry about that, *solnyshka* .”

She smiles at the endearment. “Do you like that?” he asks. He feels like he’s threading some new territory here. “*Solnyshka* ?”

“I do,” she tells him. “And others you called me... I like them too.”

“I’m glad,” he says, watching as she’s moving closer, the covers slipping from her. She pulls at his covers and then she’s carefully climbing over him, her soft and warm body right next to his. The morning is always chilly and he doesn’t want her to be cold, so despite having all of his wishes come true, he forgoes observing every inch of her in favor of keeping her warm.

“That’s so sweet,” she says when he covers them both.

“You’re sweet as well,” he tells her as she’s rubbing her nose against his. And this conversation is, too, and he cannot think but it strikes him as silly - and he doesn’t care. He doesn’t care because she kisses him. It’s just a touch of her lips, at first, then a little more, and then she opens her mouth to him and he is gone. She’s kissing him, with more certainty than previous times, exploring, taking; and he’s threading fingers through her hair, holding her face, touching her sides, absolutely enjoying how she’s pressing herself against him and then --

And then there’s an unmistakable, loud, somewhat urgent knocking. He groans. She bursts out laughing. Then he starts laughing as well.

Another knock. Aleksander is *almost certain* who it is, and well, if he doesn’t want Ivan to see them like this, Aleksander needs to get up and find *something* to cover himself.

He pulls out of the bed, aware of how Alina is looking at him - at his entire body - as he wanders around and finds his robe next to the bathtub. Just where he dropped it last night. He dresses quickly, pulling on the light black pants as well, ties the robe at the waist and goes to open the door.

It is Ivan.

And Fedyor. *And* Genya.

Ivan looks alarmed, while the other two look ... well. He’s not absolutely certain, but it looks like he just interrupted a conversation.

“Yes?” he asks.

“*Moi soverenniy*,” Ivan says. “The Sun Summoner is not in her suite.”

Aleksander stares at him for a moment. He can see a short, mortified look on Fedyor’s face, while Genya keeps her eyes forward.

And normally, this would be a reason to panic. And it’s not like Ivan is wrong to be here. It’s just that circumstances are... well. Unusual. And Aleksander has not thought about it all yet.

“Noted,” he says. “However there is no reason to panic. The Sun Summoner is quite safe,” Aleksander says. Fedyor closes his eyes for a moment. Ivan, to his credit, remains serious as he always is. And then, just because he can’t resist (and he knows he can’t possibly hide this forever, although a part of him would), Aleksander says, “She is right here, with me.”

The three of them nod and start to leave, and Aleksander closes the door. And then, because this is too entertaining to pass up, he listens.

“For Saint’s sake, Ivan,” it’s Fedyor. “*I told you so* .”

Well, of course he did. Ivan is smart, just in a different way than Fedyor, and if anything, Ivan was doing his duty as he should have. And Miss Safin, possibly, discovered that Alina is not in the Vezda suite. Aleksander sighs. It is something he should have expected, had he been thinking. But he hadn’t been thinking. Obviously.

He walks back into the room, finding Alina sitting on his bed with her robe loosely draped around her, and that reminds him that they both soon need to begin their day - he has meetings and Alina her training and lessons.

“Were we caught?” she asks, laughter in her voice.

“In a way, yes. That was Ivan - “

“Ah,” she says and her cheeks turn slightly pink, but still she gives him this wonderful, determined look as she leaves the bed. No hiding, then. “Perhaps I should have gone to my room,” she says, coming close and hugging his waist. And for a moment, one single surprising moment, he cannot tell if she is serious or not. His mouth is quicker than his mind, even if he is simply teasing.

“And leave me alone?”

Her face changes at his choice of words, playfulness gone for something infinitely tender and warm.

“But see, that is the matter,” she says, pulling him closer in such a familiar, warm way. “I could not.”

“Oh,” he says, because his mind draws blank at that.

She couldn’t leave him alone. His mind races and stops at those words, and since he cannot come up with something smart or funny, he kisses her. And that goes on and on, until another knock on the door, and the breakfast for them both being delivered. And - probably Genya’s doing - clothes for Alina.

So, they have been caught.

*

He goes about his day. It’s exactly the same as always, except it’s not - there’s a warm glow at the back of his thoughts, consisting of memories of the previous night. Of Alina, her

words, her kisses, her smile. It's as if someone has made his shadows warm, like light waiting under the door in the night.

He endures the meetings, the Tsar, his advisors and lackeys, explaining the actions he took, strategies taken and decisions made. He endures his obligations, playing the neverending game of politics, remaining just a small piece on the board, carefully choosing his battles. They will ensure the sanctuary awaits him at the end of the day.

It's cold and it's late when he finally crosses the distance between the Grand Palace and the Little Palace. He's hungry and eagerly awaiting his midday meal - belated per usual - resigning himself to eating it alone. But when he enters the dining room, a single blue iris awaits him, carefully placed close to his plates, and just like that loneliness dissipates into golden presence of her.

After reading and reviewing all the correspondence and a security meeting with Ivan and other guards he contemplates going back to his war table and his maps... and then decides he does not want that. Not today. The blue and golden flower is tucked safely inside his kefta, and later, as he sits in front of a fireplace, in a reading room that he rarely uses, he uses it to mark the place between pages of a book open on his lap. He tries to read but gives up soon and gives into thoughts of her. And it's unusual - slow and quiet and comfortable like a mild summer day, and he realizes that for the first time in ages his mind is slowing down. Not running strategies, not calculating and trying to predict where all the pieces on the board should go next. Instead he just - *is*. In his mind's eye he sees her, reliving all the little moments - the walks, the conversations, the way she held his hand in the warm room and surrounded him with light. The way she was giving herself to him last night - and he ended up giving *himself* to her.

That is how she finds him - eyes shining after her entire day. It seems to have been more agreeable than his. She is wearing her velvet robe, her hair braided and lightly pinned on top of her head.

"There you are," she says, coming close and smiling. He holds out his hand and she takes it, fingers wrapping together. She takes the book and carefully sits on his lap, her face above his, her hands holding his cheeks. *Saints*. He has seen light pour out of her veins and did not blink, but right now he feels like he's staring at the sun, and she's *blinding* him with everything she is. "How was your day?" she asks, and he smiles. Nobody truly cares what his day was like, but rather what he did accomplish.

"Boring and entirely too long," he says, his usual reservations crumbling quickly under her fingertips. For someone who spent lifetimes pulling up walls between himself and everyone else, he seems to be giving it up without a fight, and he realizes - keeping those walls in place is a fight in itself. One he is so tired of. One of his hands is still in hers, the other makes itself comfortable on her waist.

"Are you tired?" she asks then. She gives him these little bits of kindness, like tiny bites of favorite sweets, and he is hungry for more. He is starving from lifetimes of not having any. Surprising both of them he pulls her close and sits up, burying his face against her chest. She is surprised for a fraction of a moment, after which she secures her arms around him. *Not alone*. He breathes in her scent and focuses on the power - bond between them. He feels her

press a kiss on top of his head. He doesn't care if the entire world marches in here right now. Doesn't care who might knock. He wants this, and he *needs* this. He holds her tight and she leans her face at the top of his head, her hands so gentle. "It was that bad?" she asks.

"Not bad. I am just... tired," he tells her. "Tired of convincing the same people over and over." His hands let go a little bit and he leans his face against her heartbeat.

"Mhmmm. Well. I have an idea," she says. There's a tiny bit of something in her voice that makes him look up at her.

"You do?" he asks. At this point he's aware that she's about to surprise him again. She nods.

"But you have to come with me," she tells him. And then she's pulling him up to his feet and he's following.

"Wait," he says and grabs the book and the flower before she can lead him away - and lead him she does. Straight to her suite, and if several maids passing have looked at the sight of them holding hands, he's not going to care. The gossip already exists.

They pass the hallways and enter her space. She leads him to her bedroom - with candles lit and a bathtub awaiting them. It's far nicer than his, and the water smells of bathing salts and there are rose petals floating on the water.

"I was told that a nice, reinvigorating bath helps a great deal after a long, boring day," she tells him.

"Is that so?" he prods.

"It really is," she tells him seriously, briefly toying with the collar of his kefta. She seems to enjoy that. Then she's pushing the garment off his shoulders and down his arms, the opposite of what she did all those days ago when she came to him, dressed him in his armour and proceeded to disarm him with a single kiss. He lets her undress him - kefta first, which she folds neatly and places it on a chair; then she unbuttons his tunic, unties his pants -and he's letting her do all of these small, intimate things. She takes her time, untying, unwrapping, peeling away the layers of clothing, of shadows and hiding and carefully guarded thoughts until he stands bare in front of her. Her fingers trace the scars for a moment and then she puts his hands on top of her belt, signaling what she wants him to do. It takes a lot less time for him to undress her - just her robe and her nightgown, which are no match to his hurry and his desire to look and touch her whole.

And then he does. He takes her face in his palms, kisses her breathless, touches every bit of her he can reach and then lifts her in his arms and drops her softly on the bed.

It's fast this time, the way he devours her matching the hunger in him that grew and waited for centuries. Still he tries not to go too hard, paces his movements as he holds himself above her and her legs encircle his hips. She falls apart under him and he soon follows, mindful enough to spend himself on her stomach. Then he barely holds himself above her, loose and almost dizzy.

After that she coaxes him into the bath, slipping in behind him, his back against her front, her arms around him, and again she's washing him, only this time the tension has been well spent. He sits, relaxed, letting himself go boneless in her arms. And just like that, the shadows he has been weaving for years and decades split in front of her light. He might even give in and let himself think that he belongs, with her and to her, despite knowing how dangerous that is. How he's opening himself to hurt. He doesn't think about that - he doesn't want to. All he wants now is her, and to be cared for and counted upon. Be important and valued - by her. In this room all the maps and strategies don't matter. She makes him feel like he is the thing that matters.

"Are you feeling better?" she asks after a long and comfortable silence.

"Unimaginably so," he says.

"And will you stay with me?" she asks. He smiles - she doesn't even have to ask - because how would he leave? He has been too far for too long and he has spent what feels like an eternity waiting - but he did not expect this. He expected to find someone who would follow. Instead she takes him by the hand to lead him away from his loneliness. He never dreamed he would find someone to make him feel *not alone*. "Ivan might break down the door tomorrow," she teases gently.

"Let him," he tells her, water and her hands gently lulling him. He might fall asleep in this bliss. He takes her hand, one with the round scar on her palm. She didn't tell him - not yet - but he is assuming this is how she avoided her test. She hurt herself in fear and he might chide her for it, except how many times has he done the same? He doesn't want her to hurt ever again. He kisses the scar, once, twice, three times. "Because I am not going anywhere soon."

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